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New Perspectives on American Studies in the Global Age: Introduction

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Introduction

This year the NASSS summer seminar explores new directions in American Studies, under the unified title of "American Studies in the Global Age." Since it started in 2007, every year, the NASSS has selected unified titles designed to encourage participants to cross the disciplinary boundaries of established American Studies. The titles of the first to the fourth year--"America and Religions," "American Studies from Various Perspectives: Gender and Comparative Approaches," "Americanism and Social Justice," and "Toward a Common Memory of Our Past,"--all succeeded in leading students to rethink the possibilities and limits of American Studies in the light of world politics, economy, and culture. The choice of "American Studies in the Global Age" as the unified title for the final 5th-year seminar is a logical conclusion to this well-thought-out project.

As is well known, "American Studies in the Global Age" is a topic which has been repeatedly debated at conferences and in journals both in Japan and the United States in the last two decades.[1] American studies scholars of different nationalities, to name just several of them quoted in the papers of this year's plenary speakers, Ian Tyrrell, Thomas Bender, Werner Sollors, Shelly Fisher Fishkin, and Daniel Rogers have visited Japan and investigated the issue with Japanese counterparts. The underlying theme of their discussion has been "the opening of American Studies," that is, how to make this specific field of area studies at once national and transnational. A good way to answer to this apparently paradoxical question seems to be to think over the different but closely related question of why students have been so obsessed in recent years with repositioning American Studies as area studies. The moderator's opening comment also examines this question.

I. Rethinking Positions of American Studies as Area Studies

As many textbooks have made clear, American Studies as a specific field within area studies has several different origins. At first it started as a discipline

which replied to a nationalistic desire to define American principles following the leading role the United States had played in bringing the First World War to a conclusion. This was in the 1920s. At the same time, it emphasized an interdisciplinary viewpoint which crisscrossed the barriers separating established specialties, for instance, those between politics and history, religion and literature, and psychology and economics. Its connection with world geopolitics in the age of the Cold War, however, was most crucial in solidifying its disciplinary identity at institutions of higher education in the United States. In fact it can be fairly said that area studies as institutionalized nowadays emerged primarily as a product of the Cold War. To a country locked in a struggle for world dominance against the Communist bloc, dividing the world into easily comprehensible regions, each with a group of specialists fluent in its local languages, made perfect sense.[2] American Studies in Japan after the Second World War established itself as a discipline heavily dependent on the ideas and methods of this American-invented area studies.[3]

The questions which current students should ask themselves when they examine new directions for American Studies have to do with the possibility of choosing an 'area' as a subject of scholarly analysis and with the validity of defining the United States as one of those 'area(s).' The definition of an 'area' is therefore crucial in answering to these questions.

'Area(s)' can first be categorized according to their scale. The smallest can be termed a 'local' area or a 'zone.' At the next scale we find the 'region' or 'area.' Then finally comes the 'mega region' or, again, the 'area.' 'Area(s)' which are categorized by not their scale but their qualities or character, however, are important within the social sciences and the humanities. Natural areas, for example, bounded by configuration of lands, seas, and mountains are areas defined in a most commonsensical way. Next, social and cultural areas are formed when a group of people sharing common languages and traditions settle in those natural areas. The areas called "civilizational areas" are just one type of these social and cultural areas. Those social and cultural areas often form one independent political or economic area but at other times a group of them combine to form a single integral political and economic area. The nation state as has been developed since the 19th-century is one kind of such a political and economic area. Nation states also often unite with each other to form mega regions. The East and the West during the Cold War era were the most typical examples of those mega-regions. In the global age, when nations are entwined with each other through multinational and multilayered relations, supra-national entities like the European Community or the Asia Pacific Economic Community can also be understood as areas. It is clear that the world consists of these areas of different sizes and objectives and that those areas coexist not exclusively but cooperatively.[4] That is what areas are really about. Tokyo for instance is a specific local area for those who live there but at the same time it is one of the metropolitan areas of Japan and a leading area within the advanced global market as well.

A question to be asked here is whether the goals and methods that have been cultivated in the field of conventional American Studies still enable us to comprehend this complicated socio-cultural construction of areas.

II. Reviewing Goals and Methods of Conventional American Studies

As mentioned previously, the modern nation state is just one kind of political and economic area. Its distinctiveness lies in the homogeneity of its people, a feature often constructed by emphasizing its uniqueness and distinctiveness from other peoples. The United States for example boasts that its people, despite their differences in race, gender, and class, unite into one nation. It is natural that American Studies has deemed it one of its primary goals to explore the mechanism of its national creed, "E pluribus unum." In the global age, however, holding on to this conventional wisdom and according to its indiscriminate praise may in fact limit our view of the future, because the conventional concept of "one out of many" often forces excessive conformity. Many minorities in the United States in fact express their grievances about discrimination in society. In an age in which a population made up of different races, genders, and classes, claims the right to live with full pride in those attributes, Americanism requires some critical self-reviewing.

Conventional American Studies as a discipline has not been well responded well to this demand for a review of the American creed. In the early 1980s, for instance, students in both the social sciences and the humanities started to historicize the constructed nature of nationality and to reveal its negative tendency to deprive those who were pushed out to the periphery in the nation of their social rights. Works by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, all pointed out the oppressive aspect of nation building.[5] Students of American Studies, however, were slow in grasping this point. It is true that many of them recognized the limits of Americanism or American democracy and denounced racial and gender discrimination in American society. The point of that denunciation, however, consisted in lamenting the limited extent to which American ideals were being realized. In other words, they denounced the United States for not having yet fully met the requirements of its own national creed. They rarely acknowledged that the problem derived inevitably from the concept of the nation state itself as it had been invented and defined in the 19th-century western world. They failed, in other words, to historicize the problem of nation building in the history of the West and as a result did not fully recognize the *aporia* of the motto, "one out of many," an ideal which has in fact seldom been materialized without excluding particular sections of the population.

For various reasons, conventional American Studies has been holding onto the American creed. First, area studies as a discipline is perfectly designed to analyze the structure and character of a nation state because it has based its disciplinary identity on theorizing the cohesiveness of people. The distinctiveness

of the Americans therefore has been an ideal and beloved object of an area studies. Second, the United States is often thought to be a self-expressive nation, obsessed, in other words, with enunciating a national cause or discipline. This fits well again with the development of American Studies as an area studies.[6] Certain works of American diplomatic history illustrate this clearly. Diplomatic historians often argue that there is a striking parallel between foreign and domestic policy in the United States. In their views, the two policies are just a variation of the same American cause articulated in different fields. Through examining the parallels, they argue, students can approach the basic structure of Americanism. No wonder, then, that diplomatic history has been a strong field in American Studies. Third, despite the history of territorial expansion, in the mind of the American public, the United States is always a continental country. This again seems to have helped American Studies develop as a form of area studies. The history of Western cartography demonstrates the tendency of the continent to dominate our imagination as it divides the world into comprehensive units.[7] The territorial configuration of the United States, a mythologized geographical boundary, has corresponded neatly with the conventional way of comprehending it as an area.

These characteristics of American Studies, however, have often obstructed our views of the globalized world. This is a point that students should examine most carefully. The popularity of American Studies among undergraduates gives them a vantage ground from which to examine this point. The popularity of programs in area studies at universities, in both the United States and in Japan, has decreased in the last two decades for various reasons. First, studies emphasizing the conformity of nation states and the rigidity of international relations between those states have lost much of their appeal to undergraduate students craving a different perspective from which to understand the world. The contemporary world is facing many difficulties which develop across national borders: environmental destruction, a population explosion, poverty, genocide, threats of pandemics, and so forth. The goals and methods that have been cultivated in conventional area studies are not necessarily useful in finding solutions for these imminent issues because they were primarily designed to deal with domestic affairs. It is natural that students who are interested in learning new ways of dividing the world to solve those global issues find the goals and methods of conventional area studies a little outworn. New approaches to American Studies should meet this new demand of the academia.

Some students believe that conventional area studies will die out in the global age because in their views modern global affairs need a way of apprehending the world based primarily not on physical spaces but on issues. Nevertheless, the definition of area, as was discussed previously, is so elastic that it is open to reformulation in response to the critical thinking of those who are looking for the meaning of that area. At one time, say in the Cold War period, interdisciplinary inquiry into the American character in history, politics, philosophy, and so on,

was the crucial disciplinary pillar in American Studies. That however merely tells that in those years the intellectual formation made clear through that line of inquiry helped students to understand and live in that age. If they still insist on continuing to look for the same type of intellectual formation, they would have to discover for themselves some new meaning for that intellectual undertaking in the global age. Also if the times demand a different design for the world, in which national borders are porous and national membership is far more liberal, then American Studies should ask itself on how it can respond to that demand. In the last decade, "borders" or the collapse of "borders" has come to be a major topic in different branches of American Studies.[8] It is a good illustration of an effort of younger students to meet this new academic demand.

III. Seeking New Perspectives in American Studies: a Conclusion

During the last two decades scholars have made unrelenting efforts to "open" American Studies in reply to the academic concerns discussed above. Roughly speaking, they have advanced three different kinds of studies. The first pays attention to the border-crossing of people, goods, and money. Studies of immigration and capital investment are examples of this. The second focuses on the border -crossing of values and thoughts which are related and which affect each other. Studies of the transplantation of constitutionalism and the spread of radicalism are examples of this. The last finds and compares several seemingly similar but not necessarily related phenomena occurring in different places. Examinations of modernization and urbanization are examples of this approach. In other words, the first traces specific movements passing across national borders, the second explores the diffusion of thought developed across nationalities, and the last compares and examines parallel but independent changes in world societies. Of course students can't easily classify the real world into these three aspects. The world actually consists of all of these or even more simultaneously. From whatever aspect students try to abstract American experience in the world, without an imagination with which to envision the entwined relationship of those different aspects and the academic skills to verify that imagination, students will not be able to see how America has been and how it will be on this planet in the future. Some may still insist that area studies, which has emphasized interdisciplinarity and practicality as its major strengths, will be able to carry out with ease this new task in the global age. Nevertheless, to comprehend a theory is one thing but to practice it is quite another. It is not an easy task for any scholar to open a new intellectual landscape in American Studies. The three plenary speakers at the NASSS 2011, Paul A. Kramer, Jeremi Suri, and Anita Patterson, however, have all taken up that challenge. They all presented eye-opening and provocative papers at the symposium. They showed that they had the imagination to look at the United States both from inside and outside. It is regrettable that Jeremi Suri could not actually attend the seminar in person because his paper

stimulated the most lively and critical discussion. His paper in fact forced the audience to reconsider the real meaning and necessity of the "opening" of American Studies. It is notable at the same time that all three papers more or less try to reexamine the American experience by taking it as that of an empire. American empire does indeed have different aspects: relating to race, free-market capitalism, popular sovereignty, republicanism, and dehumanizing industrialism. All of the plenary papers, however, show us that without a nuanced understanding of that complex American experience, we will no longer be able to assess its past nor to foresee its future. The following papers show this in details.

Who needs transnational American Studies eventually? Those who wish to deconstruct and regenerate their self-understanding need it. The free discussion for more than an hour at the symposium was concluded with that statement by the moderator.

Notes

1. As early examples of this, see Ian Tyrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review,* vol. 96, no. 4 (October, 1991), 1031-55; David Thelen, "Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History", *The Journal of American History,* vol. 79, no. 2 (September, 1992), 432-462.
2. John Richards, "In Defense of Area Studies," *Occasional Paper: Global Forum Series, no. 95-01* (Center for International Studies, Duke University; January, 1995).
3. Endo Yasuo, "The First Thirty Years of the Center: American Studies in Japan and the Center for American Studies at the University of Tokyo," *American Studies,* vol. 4 (1999), 139-154.
4. Hamashita Takeshi, "*Rekishi Kenkyu to Chiiki Kenkyu—Rekishi Ni Arawareta Chiiki Kukan* (History Studies and Area Studies: Space and Area Represented in History)," Hamashita Takeshi & Karashima Noboru, eds., *Chiiki No Sekaishi I: Chiikishi Towa Nanika* (*History of Areas in the World; What is History of Areas?*) (Yamakawa Shuppan: Tokyo, 1997), 16-52.
5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (New Perspectives on the Past) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); Eric J. Hobsbawm & Terence O. Ranger ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge and New York; Cambridge University Press, 1983).
6. Furuta Motoo, "*Chiiki Kubunron* (How to Divide Areas)," in *Iwanami Koza Sekai Rrekishi I: Sekaishi Eno Apurochi* (*Iwanami Lectures on World History I: Approaches to World History*) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1998), 37-53; Shiraishi Takashi, *Umi No Teikoku: Ajia O Do Kangaeruka* (*An Empire on Sea: Views on Asia*) (Tokyo: Chuo Koron Shinsya, 2000).
7. Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), Chapter 5, "Global Geography in the Historical Imagination."
8. Special Issue of "Law and Borders: Law and Construction of American Borders,"

American Quarterly, vol. 57, no. 3 (September, 2005); Endo Yasuo, "*Shinpojiumu: Nijyu Isseiki No America To Boda* (Borders and the 21st-Century America: Report of a Symposium)," *Amerika Kenkyu* (*The American Review*), vol. 43 (2009), 49-51; Sven Beckert, "New Geographies of the History of North America," *CPAS Newsletter,* vol. 12, no. 1 (September, 2011), 1-4.